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NONFICTION

'n' write

logies sample the work 2 early critics

By Greg Kot

Richard Meltzer and a half-million hippies attended Woodstock. Most of the flower children hung out for three days in the mud. But Meltzer took one look around Max Yasgur's farm and yawned. Early on the first day he walked out of the youth happening of the century, and an iconoclast was born. His review of an album by the performer who prompted his exit (an unfortunate singer-songwriter named Bert Sommer), reprinted in a new collection of his writings, "A Whore Just Like the Rest," is more inspired than most accounts of Woodstock itself.

Meltzer and his drinking buddy Nick Tosches, who also gets the retrospective treatment in "The Nick Tosches Reader," were among the first writers to make a living as rock critics. Even in the we're-all-in-this-together haze of '60s youth culture, they reeked of every-man-for-himself attitude.

They were more rebellious than many of the purported rock 'n' roll rebels they were assigned to write about, and often funnier. Along with Lester Bangs, they weren't just writers, they were larger-than-life personalities—the room-wrecking pranksters of the nascent critical Establishment that included more refined intellectuals such as Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus and devoted fans-turned-writers such as Paul Williams and Greg Shaw. The pranksster critics reviewed albums that didn't exist and eviscerated ones that they never actually bothered to play. Tosches once approached rock-poet Patti Smith about doing an interview and was turned down, so he made one up. Meltzer not only faked an interview with Andy Warhol, he wrote the piece as though the pale pop icon were interviewing *him*.

Facts never interfered with a good story in this gonzo approach to criticism, but then Tosches and Meltzer never pretended to be reporters. The distanced perspective of the journalist was, Tosches writes, a "curse and contagion" that repressed the honesty and feeling of great writing. Like the Beats, they didn't just observe the moment, they immersed themselves in it, blurring the line between subject and author, truth and fiction, high beauty, music and noise.

Meltzer figured the best way to cover rock 'n' [illegible]. "You've gotta go straight at your own jugular . . . while the blood is still fresh." Not for nothing did the hucksters, the Sex Pistols, nominate Meltzer to [illegible] concert in San Francisco, in 1978. On the stage [illegible] of the building by the legendary rock promoter [illegible], the ousted author exults in "Whore"):

[illegible] and his intoxicated rants had given concrete [illegible] of rock culture. Upon reading Meltzer's [illegible], Jimi Hendrix whispered to the author, "You were [illegible]... right?" In '60s-speak, this was the ultimate [illegible] that Meltzer, in his own way, was on the [illegible] but as provocative and hip as the rockers he was [illegible]. "The Aesthetics of Rock," wasn't the first long- [illegible]-crystallized subject, but it was the most audacious [illegible] of a minor celebrity. Dense and daunting, a blend [illegible] delirious wordplay and obtuse references culled [illegible] by studies in college, "The Aesthetics of Rock" is [illegible] in the span of one of Meltzer's patented run-on [illegible]. Like rock itself, the book is visceral, tactile. It [illegible], its meandering syntax and explosive epiphanies [illegible] a psychodramatic album track like "The End," by [illegible].

[illegible]dain for what he saw as increasingly greedy and [illegible]s and their handlers did not sit well with a rock- [illegible] that itself craved mainstream legitimacy begin- [illegible]. The closing essays in "Whore" is "Vinyl Reckoning," [illegible] record collection as a flimsy excuse to explain— [illegible]g and purpose of his life and work. He rants against [illegible]nt for denying him his true place in the rock-critic [illegible]t: "Was I ever a rockwriter?" Only Meltzer could [illegible].

[illegible] rock critic.

Nick Tosches (right) once approached rock-poet Patti Smith (above) about doing an interview and was turned down, so he made one up. Richard Meltzer not only faked an interview with Andy Warhol (above right), he wrote the piece as though the pale pop icon were interviewing him.

turn a rock review into existential drama.

Next to Meltzer's fevered self-obsession, Tosches practically reads like pulp fiction: pomposity-deflating staccato blows aimed at the egos of the famous. His interviews are hilariously blunt. To Jerry Lee Lewis: "Do you figure Elvis went to heaven or to hell?" To Patti Smith: "Were you a horny teenager?" To Muddy Waters: "Do you like getting drunk?"

As a self-acknowledged scoundrel, glue-sniffer, drunk, womanizer and thief, Tosches had the bad-boy credentials to match those of Meltzer, Bangs and the rest. He detested Elvis Presley and the Beatles. But he loved rock 'n' roll, the weirder the better.

He was not above the occasional hack assignment (he wrote the quickie bio "Hell and Cities: Dangerous Dances") to pay the bills, but nobody profiled rock's fringe characters with greater insight. His book "Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll" grasps the music's essential chaos better than countless official rock histories.

But the last half of "The Nick Tosches Reader" finds the author exploring different terrain (everything from his sex life to Robert De Niro), no longer caring to wade through the unceasing barrage of record-company product for inspiration. He now concentrates on biographies (see review at right) and novels, for which he has been justly acclaimed.

Meltzer also has published numerous non-rock books. Whereas he once saw rock as "an ever-enlarging Sea of Possibility," the last decade is "an empty room." Perhaps it's just as well. In today's more serene climate for rock journalism, it's doubtful that the brutally blunt first-person brand of criticism practiced by Meltzer and Tosches would be welcome. As these two anthologies demonstrate, that's the readers' loss.

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Ages 2-5 years

ABC KIDS
By Laura Ellen Williams
Philomel, $15.99

The capital letters are clear, and the words chosen to illustrate them are ordinarily within a reader's ken: "Z" for zipper, "D" for dirt. The photographs chosen, however, are special, because children are at the center. A little girl revels in her "D"-for-dirty face and hands. Could "N" for nap have been a serendipitous occasion, a little model fallen asleep? If she's only posing, it's close to perfect, with a soft blanket sheltering her and the chubby thumb-sucking fist resting softly on her face. This alphabet book isn't a prelim to a quiz, but a mirror of our lives and fancies.

Ages 5-7 years

WILL YOU BE MY FRIEND?: A Bunny and Bird Story
By Nancy Tafuri
Scholastic, $15.95

The soft tactility of Nancy Tafuri's images has always been appealing, whether it's a ball or bird or bunny being shown. Here the print is large, with not too many words on the page, appealing to beginning readers. Bird, though she wants to be friends with Bunny, is shy, and only the events of a stormy night, when her nest is destroyed, let her see just how funny Bunny is. The pages are well-designed, with peaceful white space. If only those two little mice—on the back cover and often seen nearby—could have been worked into the story. Ask your new reader to think what stories the mice have.

Ages 10-14 years

SNAIL MAIL NO MORE
By Paula Danziger and Ann M. Martin
Scholastic, $16.95

Paula Danziger and Ann M. Martin are the authors of school and family stories devoured by 9-to-12-year-olds. This is the second book in a series they wrote one e-mail message at a time, with neither author revealing a larger plot to the other, just responding to the other's e-mail. Tory Starr and Elizabeth are no longer living in the same town, but they're electronically linked. Some of the events they share—a sibling's birth, middle-school parties, boyfriends—are ordinary, but there's one crisis [illegible] deeper, and the mixture of [illegible] young readers who couldn't [illegible]

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